

PETER PINDAR AND THE ENTOMOLOGY OF HIS POEMS

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For some reason or another, Walton in his excellent paper on "The Entomology of English Poetry,"¹ omitted any reference to the insects mentioned in the Hudibrastic verses of Peter Pindar, the blustery, calumniator of the Eighteenth Century. Upon reading over the lampoons of Pindar, one finds frequent mention of insects, sometimes those not highly regarded. In some instances the creatures are utilized merely as nuclei or starting points around or upon which his effusions are built and are not in themselves centres of admiration. In others, they are simply named in his verses, usually as objects of ridicule.

More appreciation of his work, or at least more amusement therefrom, can be gained if one is somewhat familiar with the times in which he lived and with his life or parts thereof. Permanent popularity and satirical writings seldom travel hand-in-hand. Literature does not seem to be overburdened by accounts of his life, at least not accounts that are readily accessible. Thackeray, in his essays on "The English Humourists of the Eighteenth Century," does not mention him even in passing, and in his "George the Third" sketch of court and town life, a most excellent place in which to introduce Pindar, nullibicity is his portion. Poor, scurrilous Peter!

Peter Pindar, or more accurately John Wolcot, was born at Dodbrooke in Devonshire in 1738. Some of his early years were spent at Fowey in Cornwall with his uncle, a physician, and he too studied for that profession at Fowey, at Bodmin, France, and at London. When nearly thirty, or in 1767, he accompanied Sir William Trelawney, newly appointed Governor of Jamaica and a neighbor, to the West Indies where he was made "Physician-General" to Jamaica. Here he was quite a favorite on account of his sociability. As his time was not fully occupied

¹ Proc. Ent. Soc. Wash. Vol. 24, Nos. 7-8, 1922.

by his official duties and as Trelawney was anxious to give him a better living in the Church in which there was then a vacancy, Wolcot went back to England, was ordained by the Bishop of London, and returned to Jamaica as a clergyman, where according to Allibone's "Dictionary of English Literature" he amused himself by shooting ring-tailed pigeons on Sundays.

This seems to be quite an unusual pastime for a divine, but it appears that there was some slight reason, for Wolcot at least, to indulge in such a diversion. In Chambers' "Cyclopaedia of English Literature" where the account appears to be a little more sympathetic it is stated that Wolcot's congregation consisted mainly of negroes, whose principal market-day and holiday was Sunday. This resulted in the church attendance being very poor, in fact, sometimes no one attended; thereupon Wolcot and his clerk would wait virtuously for ten minutes and then proceed to the nearby shore and shoot. Mr. Saintsbury in his essay "Twenty Years of Political Satire" speaks of him as an "unclerical cleric" and says that such a person as Wolcot, whose morals were "avowedly and ostentatiously loose," could never have been ordained at any other time than the Eighteenth Century.

After Trelawney's death Wolcot accompanied Lady Trelawney back to England in 1768 and resumed the practice of medicine at Truro in Cornwall. Allibone's, seemingly unfriendly, account says that after his return he spent twelve years in attempts to establish himself at Truro, Helstone and other towns in Cornwall.

In 1778 he published "A Poetical Epistle to the Reviewers" and a volume of "Poems on Various Subjects." In 1780 he moved to London and two years later entertained the public with his "Lyric Odes to the Royal Academicians," continuing to write copiously for nearly twenty-five years, directing his pasquinades which often showed wit and vigor against kings, lords and commoners. His attacks, eagerly read and widely circulated, were leveled at King George III, the Queen, Boswell, Pitt, Sir Joseph Banks, Sir William Hamilton, West, the British Museum, the Royal Society and other things and persons. According to some accounts the ministry thought it worth while to purchase his silence for a time by paying him £300 per year.

In 1800 William Gifford took the field against Wolcot, fully justified most likely, and drew a most uncomplimentary portrait of him in his "Epistle to Pindar." Wolcot, considering the attack as personal which no doubt it was, fell upon Gifford with a club as he was entering Wright's shop in Piccadilly. During the brawl Gifford, so the version in Allibone's states, acquired the club which he assiduously applied to Wolcot's person, the combat being finished by the crowd rolling Peter in the gutter and from all accounts the gutters at that time were not sanitary.

It is recorded that Wolcot, before moving to London, inherited some £2000 at the death of his uncle, and that in 1795 by a shrewd bargain with his booksellers he obtained an annuity of £250 payable semi-yearly for the copyright of his works. He enjoyed this income for nearly twenty years to the great loss and sorrow of his booksellers. He continued until within five years of his death to disembody a stream of satires, political and otherwise, not even blindness or old age stopping his bitter and witty attacks; however, during the last ten years or so of his activity public interest in them was ebbing and turning to other things.

Mr. Saintsbury, in his estimate of Wolcot, speaks of his cleverness, his amusingness, his dirtiness, his ill-nature and his rather poor sense of style, saying that if Wolcot "had only been a little more of a scholar, and a great deal more of a gentleman, he would have been a very great man indeed," and sums up his literary mood by noting its resemblance to that of a cat, "not a cat in a rage, but a cat in a state of merriment, purring and mumbling, and rolling about" and occasionally biting or scratching.

Wolcot died at his home in Somers' Town, January 14, 1819, and was buried in the churchyard of St. Paul's, Covent Garden.

The account in Allibone's terminates tragically as follows: "The 'end' of such a life was not 'peace.' 'Is there anything I can do for you?' asked Taylor, as his friend lay on his death bed. 'Give me back my youth' was the melancholy response that closed a vain and unprofitable career."

Although I do not question the truth of what are supposed to be Wolcot's dying words, similar ones, I may remark, have been

spoken by persons long before they reached their death beds and are not always to be taken seriously. As for his career being "vain and unprofitable," Wolcot certainly added to the gayety of his time and no doubt thoroughly enjoyed being the satirical rowdy that he was.

The following extracts of his writings, in which insects are mentioned, are from the volume, "The Works of Peter Pindar, Esq.," published by Jones and Co., London, about 1854 or 1855, according to the advertisements in the back of the book. In all likelihood the volume does not represent the complete works of Wolcot. The following two poems are from Pindar's "Tales of the Hoy," the latter one being facetiously attributed to the authorship of Lord Salisbury.

THE DRUNKEN FLY

Poor little reeling, thoughtless soul,
To tumble drunk into the bowl!
Death to thy thread had clapped his knife;
Go, wipe thy nose, and wings, and thighs,
And brighten up thy maudling eyes,
And thank the captain for thy life!

In future, get not *quite* so drunk!
Thy girl, perhaps a lass of *spunk*,
May wish thy amorous powers to prove;
And should'st thou, drunk, the wanton chase,
Ebriety may bring *disgrace*;
And *who* would look a *fool* in love?

VERSES ON A FLY

That Pitched on the Cheek of a Most Beautiful
Young Lady.
Happy, happy, happy fly!
Were I *you*, and *you* were I!
But *you* will always be a fly,
And *I* remain Lord Salisbury!

The next, of which only the first four verses are quoted, was "written in the Year 1768, at Santa Cruz, in Company with a Son of the late Admiral Boscawen, at the House of Mr. Mackerriek, a Merchant of that Place." The missing portions deal mainly with the unsightly appearance which the two guests will

have the next morning when they present themselves to the young Spanish ladies of fashion.

ELEGY TO THE FLEAS OF TENERIFFE

Ye hopping natives of a hard, hard bed,
 Whose bones, *perchance*, may ache as well as ours,
 O let us rest in peace the weary head,
This night—the first we ventured to your bowers.

Thick as a flock of starlings on our skins,
 Ye turn at once, to brown, the lily's white;
 Ye stab us also, like so many pins—
 Sleep swears he can't come near us whilst ye bite.

In vain we preach—in vain the candle's ray
 Broad flashes on the imps, for blood that itch—
 In vain we brush the busy hosts away;
 Fearless, on *other parts* their thousands pitch.

And now I hear the hungry varlet cry,
 "Eat hearty, Fleas—they're some outlandish men—
 Fat stuff—no Spaniards all so lean and dry—
 Such charming venison ne'er may come agen."

The following lines are from Ode XI of a number of "Expos-
 tulatory Odes to A Great Duke and a Little Lord."

My lords, I won't consent to be a bug,
 To batten in the royal rug,
 And on the backs of monarchs meanly crawl,
 And more, my lords, I hope I never shall.
 Yet certain vermin I can mention, love it.
 You know the miserables that can prove it.

Pindar's "Ode to the Glow-Worm," quoted in full, appears to be the only poem in which admiration for insects is shown.

ODE TO THE GLOW-WORM

Bright stranger, welcome to my field,
 Here feed in safety, here thy radiance yield;
 To me, O nightly be thy splendour given;
 Oh, could a wish of mine the skies command,
 How would I gem thy leaf with liberal hand,
 With every sweetest dew of heaven!

Say, dost thou kindly light the fairy train,
 Amidst their gambols on the stilly plain,
 Hanging thy lamp upon the moistened blade?
 What lamp so fit, so pure as thine,
 Amidst the gentle elfin band to shine,
 And chase the horrors of the midnight shade?

Oh! may no feathered foe disturb thy bower,
 And with barbarian beak thy life devour:
 Oh! may no ruthless torrent of the sky,
 O'erwhelming, force thee from thy dewy seat;
 Nor tempests tear thee from thy green retreat,
 And bid thee 'midst the humming myriads die!

Queen of the insect-world, what leaves delight?
 Of such these willing hands a bower shall form,
 To guard thee from the rushing rains of night,
 And hide thee from the wild wing of the storm.

Sweet child of stillness, 'midst the awful calm
 Of pausing Nature, thou art pleased to dwell;
 In happy silence to enjoy thy balm,
 And shed, through life, a lustre round thy cell.

How different man, the imp of noise and strife,
 Who courts the storm that tears and darkens life;
 Blessed when the passions wild the soul invade!
 How nobler far to bid those whirlwinds cease;
 To taste, like thee, the luxury of peace,
 And shine in solitude and shade!

Apparently flies tumbled in the punch during Pindar's time as they do now, upon occasion.

THE TOPER AND THE FLIES

A group of topers at a table sat,
 With punch that much regales the thirsty soul:
 Flies soon the party joined, and joined the chat,
 Humming, and pitching round the mantling bowl.
 At length those flies got drunk, and for their sin,
 Some hundreds lost their legs, and tumbled in;
 And sprawling 'midst the gulph profound,
 Like Pharoah and his daring host, were drowned!
 Wanting to drink—one of the men
 Dipped from the bowl the drunken host,
 And drank—then taking care that none were lost,
 He put in every mother's son agen.

Up jumped the Bacchanalian crew on this,
 Taking it very much amiss—
 Swearing, and in the attitude to *smite*:—
 “Lord!” cried the man, with gravely-lifted eyes,
 “Though I don’t like to swallow flies,
 I did not know but *others might*.”

TO A FLY

Taken Out of a Bowl of Punch
 Ah! poor intoxicated little knave,
 Now senseless, floating on the fragrant wave;
 Why not content the cakes alone to munch?
 Dearly thou pay’st for buzzing round the bowl:
 Lost to the world, thou busy sweet-lipped soul—
 Thus Death, as well as Pleasure, dwells with Punch.

Now let me take thee out, and moralise.—
 Thus ’tis with mortals, as it is with flies,
 For ever hankering after Pleasure’s cup:
 Though Fate, with all his legions, be at hand,
 The beasts, the draught of Circe can’t withstand,
 But in goes every nose—they must, will sup.

The following effusion is only part of a lampoon that was aimed at Sir Joseph Banks, President of the Royal Society.

SIR JOSEPH BANKS AND THE BOILED FLEAS

Some discontents arising among the more enlightened members of the R—— Society, on account of Sir Joseph’s non-communication of wisdom to the Royal Journals, spurred the knight on at last to open his mouth.—He told an intimate friend that he had made a discovery that would astonish the world, enrich the journals, and render himself immortal.—With the most important confidence and philosophic solemnity, he affirmed that he was upon the very eve of proving what had never entered into the soul of man, *viz.* that *fleas* were *lobsters*.—Accordingly, Jonas Dryander was ordered to go and collect fifteen hundred fleas, and boil them; which, if they changed to the fine crimson of the lobster, would put the identity of the species beyond the possibility of a doubt.—At length, the beds of the president were ransacked by his *flea-crimp*, Jonas.—Fifteen hundred of the hopping inhabitants were caught, and passed the dreadful ordeal of boiling water; with what success, O gentle reader, the Ode will inform thee.

Sir Joseph has his flatterers, too, in hand,
 Who say soft things—yea, very soft, indeed,
 For which the gentle flattering band
 Gain buttered toast, sweet flattery’s oily meed.

A girl for novelty where'er it lies,
 In mosses, fleas, or cockle-shells, or flies,
 Sir Joseph ever seeks for something new:
 Of this, whene'er he sits, he gravely talks,
 Or whilst he eats, or drinks, or runs, or walks,
 Amidst his royal and attendant crew.

One morning, at his house in Soho-square,
 As with a solemn awe-inspiring air,
 Amidst some royal sycophants he sat,
 Most manfully their masticators using,
 Most pleasantly their greasy mouths amusing,
 With coffee, buttered toast, and bird's nest chat;
 In Jonas Dryander, the favourite, came,
 Who manufactures all Sir Joseph's fame—
 "What luck?" Sir Joseph bawled—"say, Jonas, say."—
 "I've boiled just fifteen hundred,"—Jonas whined—
 "The devil a one changed colour could I find;"
 Intelligence creating dire dismay!—

Then Jonas cursed, with many a wicked wish,
 Then showed the stubborn fleas upon a dish—
 "How," roared the President, and backward fell—
 "There goes, then, my hypothesis to hell!"
 And now his head in deep despair he shook;
 Now closed his eyes, and now upon his breast,
 He, muttering, dropped, his sable beard unblest;
 Now twirled his thumbs, and groaned with piteous look.

Pindar stated that he "would not have so frequently taken the liberty of putting vulgarisms into the worthy President's mouth, had he not known that Sir Joseph was the most accomplished swearer of the Royal Society."

In 1786 Pindar produced "The Lousiad, a Heroi-comic Poem" in four cantos, a lengthy and most nonsensical and amazing piece of banter during the course of which he makes game of the King, the Queen, members of the Royal household, noblemen, Court favorites, the cook-major, and other persons and various things that annoyed him. The entire satire is pyramided upon the finding of a louse, which occupies the stage only for a short time at the beginning, speedily giving way to more important objects of Pindar's derision.

At the beginning the reader is informed as follows: "It is necessary to inform thee, that his majesty actually discovered, some time ago, as he sat at table, a *louse* on his plate. The emotion occasioned by the unexpected appearance of such a guest can be better imagined than described. An edict was, in consequence, passed for shaving the cooks, scullions, &c. and the unfortunate louse condemned to die. Such is the foundation of the *Lousiad*.—With what degree of merit the Poem is executed, the *un-critical* as well as *critical* reader will decide." The cooks kick up a fine row about the edict, hold meetings, make speeches, etc., but are finally shaved in the end of the fourth canto. Pindar says "As many people persist in their incredulity with respect to the attack made by the barbers on the heads of the harmless cooks, I shall exhibit a list of the unhappy sufferers: it is the Palace list, and therefore as authentic as the Gazette.

A TRUE LIST OF THE SHAVED AT BUCKINGHAM HOUSE

Two master cooks,	Six under scourers,	Five pastry people,
Three yeoman ditto,	Six turnbroches,	Eight silver scullery, for
Four grooms,	Two soil-carriers,	laughing at the cooks.
Three children,	Two door-keepers,	
Two master scourers,	Eight boys,	

In all, fifty one.

"A young man, named John Bear, would not submit, and lost his place."

The poem is much too long to cite in full and, although the opening lines do not do justice to its contents, they are quoted because of the louse.

The Louse I sing, who, from some head unknown,
 Yet born and educated near a throne,
 Dropped down—(so willed the dread decree of fate!)
 With legs wide sprawling on the monarch's plate:
 Far from the raptures of a wife's embrace;
 Far from the gambols of a tender race,
 Whose little feet he taught with care to tread
 Amidst the wide dominions of the head;
 Led them to daily food with fond delight,
 And taught the tiny wanderers where to bite;

To hide, to run, advance, or turn their tails;
When hostile combs attacked, or vengeful nails:
Far from those pleasing scenes ordained to roam,
Like wise Ulysses, from his native home;
Yet like that sage, though forced to roam and mourn,
Like him, alas! not fated to return!
Who, full of rags and glory, saw his boy
And wife again, and dog that died for joy.
Down dropped the luckless *louse*, with fear appalled,
And wept his wife and children as he sprawled.